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AUTHOR Frederick, Lynda R.; Shaw, Edward L., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the prevalence of the use of portfolios in selected public elementary schools. Participants were asked for demographic information and information about the amount of training they had in portfolio use and the perceived strengths and benefits, weaknesses and barriers they find in portfolio use. A questionnaire developed for the study was completed by 162 elementary school teachers from 12 elementary schools in a large public school system in southwest Alabama. Three schools were in the inner city, three were rural, three were magnet schools, and three were suburban. Most of the respondents reported using whole language teaching strategies (86%) and portfolios (88%) in their classrooms. Almost half had received one training session in the use of portfolios. Language arts and reading were identified as the areas that worked best with portfolios. Teachers indicated that portfolios did have an impact on their teaching strategies. The majority thought that portfolios would not replace report cards, and they felt that parents did not understand portfolios. However, half of the teachers thought that portfolios were effective for communication between teacher and student and teacher and teacher, but not between principal and school board. Many teachers (46%) thought that a weakness of portfolio use was that they are too time consuming. Being able to document students' progress fully was listed as a major benefit of portfolio use. Results show that teachers in these schools are familiar with portfolios and are using them as authentic assessment. An appendix contains the survey instrument. (Contains four tables and four references.) (SLD)

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Lynda R. Frederick
and
Edward L. Shaw, Jr.

University of South Alabama
College of Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
UCOM 3208
Mobile, AL 36688-0002

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Introduction

Questions have been raised about the authenticity of standardized tests in evaluating student learning. As educators search for alternatives to standardized testing, portfolio assessment increases in popularity. Changes in instructional practices, particularly in the area of language arts, have created a demand for changes in assessment practices. In recent years, portfolio assessment has been considered an important curriculum trend by professional educational and research organizations like the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

There are many types of portfolios in use in various schools throughout the nation. Some disagreement continues over what a portfolio is and how it differs from collecting children's work in folders. While variations and disagreements continue, perhaps the most universally accepted definition of a portfolio is one that was developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory which states that:

> A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits to the student (and/or others) the student's efforts, progress or achievement in (a) given area(s). This collection must include:
>
> 1. student participation in selection of portfolio content;
> 2. the criteria for selection;
> 3. the criteria for judging merit; and
> 4. evidence of student self-reflection (Arter, 1990).

Portfolios which fit the NREL definition may enable teachers to give students and their parents immediate and continuous feedback in a meaningful and concrete way. Further, the collaboration included in the construction process of a portfolio as described above may provide teachers with insights into student learning processes, thus improving instructional planning and delivery. DeFina (1992) writes that portfolios empower teachers through their curriculum and instructional decisions due to its interactive and dynamic properties. Herman and Winters (1994) found in their study of teacher self-reports that portfolios have a positive influence on instructional strategies chosen by teachers as well as the content of the curriculum taught. It is important to note that the contents of a portfolio are dependent upon its purpose, and in some cases the subject area from which it originates (Frederick, 1992).

It may be concluded that portfolio assessment is gaining recognition as an acceptable alternative and/or supplement to traditional assessment. Sometimes portfolio assessment is used to complement existing testing procedures, but more and more frequently it is used in the place of such procedures. Because of trends toward more authentic alternatives to standardized testing procedures, the use of portfolio assessment has become more attractive (Frederick, 1992).

Statement of the Problem

This research study was conducted to determine the prevalence of portfolios use in selected public elementary schools. Questions participants in the study were asked included demographic information, the amount of training in portfolio use, and what perceived strengths, weaknesses, benefits and barriers they feel are associated with portfolio use. Additionally, participants were asked about use of whole language instructional strategies, and if portfolios were an effective means of communication between teacher, students, parents and administrators.

Method

A questionnaire was developed by the researchers to access teachers' views concerning the use of portfolios in their classrooms and schools. (See Appendix A) The questionnaire had six demographic items and 11 items that focussed specifically on portfolios. Participants were able to complete the questionnaire in approximately ten minutes. The responses to the questionnaire were treated with confidentiality and all participants remained anonymous. The survey was administered in Spring, 1996.

The population of the study was composed of 162 teachers representing 12 elementary schools in a large public school system in southwest Alabama. Of the 12 public elementary schools chosen for the study, three could be described as inner city schools, three could be described as rural schools, three are magnet schools and three could be described as suburban. The student populations of these schools provided a diversity in SES, racial composition and achievement levels.

Results

Of the 162 subjects involved in the study, 95% were female and 5% were male. (See Table 1) The majority of the teachers (52%) had earned a masters degree, while 41% are currently enrolled in a graduate program. Fifty-six percent of the teachers had between one and 15 years teaching experience. Of this group, those with teaching experience of five years or less composed the largest portion of the survey population. Most of the participants (74%) were teachers of primary grade children and were assigned to a self-contained classroom (86%).

The majority of the respondents reported using whole language teaching strategies (86%) and portfolios (88%) in their classrooms. (See Table 2) Almost half of the participants (44%) had received one training session in the use of portfolios. Language Arts (36%) and Reading (16%) were identified as the areas of study that work best with portfolios. When asked if portfolios made writing Individual Education Plans (IEP) easier, 44% gave no response, and 27% agreed that portfolios were helpful.

Teachers surveyed indicated that portfolios did not have an impact on their teaching

strategies (53%). (See Table 3) The majority (90%) felt that report cards would not be replaced by portfolios. Seventy percent of the respondents felt that parents do not understand portfolios. Conversely, 41% of the participants did feel that portfolios were a viable means of communication by teacher to parent. Half of the teachers (50%) indicated that portfolios were effective for communication between teacher and student and teacher to teacher (42%), but not between principal and school board (44%).

Almost half (47%) of the teachers indicated portfolios which show children's progress over a period of time as an important strength of portfolio use. Twenty percent of the participants felt that the documentation that portfolios provide for grade determination, cumulative records, parent conferences and improving teaching strategies was very valuable. A smaller portion of the population (10%) expressed enthusiasm for portfolios because children learn to become self-evaluators and good decision makers.

The weaknesses listed by 46% of the respondents indicated that teachers see portfolios as a process that is too time consuming. Some teachers (23%) felt that teachers lacked the proper training and guidance to use portfolios effectively. Another 22% listed concerns about portfolios lacking objectivity and consistency for assessment purposes. Seventeen percent of the teachers listed problems with storage and handling of bulky materials as a problem.

Being able to fully document children's progress was listed as an important benefit of portfolio use by 36% of the teachers surveyed. Empowering children through opportunities to self-evaluate and make choices was identified as beneficial by 15% of the respondents. However, the amount of time it takes to use portfolios effectively was indicated as a major barrier by 36% of the teachers. Fourteen percent felt that lack of teacher training and guidance was also a problem. Storage and handling of bulky portfolio materials was described as a significant barrier by 10% of the participants.

Discussion and Implications

The results of this survey indicated that teachers are familiar with and use portfolios in their classrooms as a form of authentic assessment. According to the survey, portfolio use faces many of the barriers that all new assessment tools encounter. Although portfolios are accepted by teachers, there is some concern that parents lack an understanding of portfolio use. Overwhelmingly, the opinion of the teachers surveyed is that portfolios will not take the place of the more traditional forms of assessment in the near future. The impact of portfolios for reporting student progress to parents is not supported by these teachers' responses. The perception that most parents and administrators require numerical values is very strong. Additional training and inservice in the use and interpretation of portfolios by administrators and parents would be indicated.

Reading and Language Arts are two disciplines teachers indicated complement the use of portfolios. The large percentage of respondents had 15 years of experience or less. This

indicated a recent introduction to the Whole Language style of instruction. It appears Whole Language instruction is an excellent starting place for using portfolios, especially with new teachers. Although these two disciplines were identified by the majority of the teachers, this is not to say that other subject areas are not involved in portfolio use as well. It is interesting to note that 16% of the teachers use portfolios in all subjects.

The majority of the teachers indicated they use portfolios, while 78% indicated they had participated in one or no training sessions. The accuracy of a portfolio as an assessment tool for this school system is questionable when 34% of the respondents received no training in the use of portfolios. The teachers' doubts about portfolios being a viable means of communication between principals and school boards seems to underscore this concern. Additional instruction for teachers, administrators, and supervisors, as well as, regularly scheduled visitations throughout the school year are indicated.

The impact of portfolio use appears to be increasing. More inservice programs with information about alternative methods for gathering formative and summative evaluation information by teachers and administrators could possibly increase portfolio usage. Additional training for parents through parent, teacher, and administration conferences or PTO meetings could help bridge the gap in the lack of understanding and acceptance of portfolios as an important form of assessment.

Future research should be done in other school districts and with middle and high school teachers. Additional research should be structured to determine the effects of training using portfolios by administrators on the actual use of portfolios in their schools.

References

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Table 1

Demographic Data

Gender

Female	=	95%
Male	=	5%

* Highest Degree Earned

B.A./B.S.	=	41%
M.A./M.Ed.	=	52%
EDS	=	3%

* Subjects Taught

All	=	86%
Math	=	1%
Reading	=	1%
Science	=	1%
PE	=	1%
Other	=	1%
No response	=	9%

* Number of Years Experience

0 - 5	=	27%	16 - 20	=	17%
6 - 10	=	15%	21 - 25	=	18%
11 - 15	=	14%	26 - 30 +	=	4%

* Grade Currently Teaching

K	=	16%	5	=	11%
1	=	15%	6	=	2%
2	=	14%	PE	=	1%
3	=	16%	Special Ed	=	7%
4	=	13%	Guidance	=	1%
			Combination	=	2%

* Percentages have been rounded for reporting purposes, therefore not all categories equal 100%.

Table 2

Data Indicating Portfolio Use

* Whole Language Use

Yes	=	85%
No	=	14%

* Portfolio Use

Yes	=	80%
No	=	11%

* Training Sessions

0	=	34%	3	=	4%	6	=	1%
1	=	44%	4	=	1%			
2	=	14%	5	=	1%			

** Disciplines that work best with portfolios

Writing	=	17%	Science	=	2%
Reading	=	16%	All	=	16%
Language Arts	=	36%	None	=	2%
Math	=	14%	Art	=	2%
Social Studies	=	4%			

* Easier to Write IEP's with Portfolios

Yes	=	27%
No	=	17%
Do Not Know	=	13%
No Response	=	44%

* Percentages have been rounded for reporting purposes, therefore, not all categories equal 100%.

** Total is greater than 100% due to respondent's choice of disciplines.

Table 3

Communication Using Portfolios

* Teaching Strategies Influenced by Portfolio Use

Yes	=	28%
No	=	53%

Report Cards Replaced by Portfolios

Yes	=	4%
No	=	90%
Do Not Know	=	2%
No Response	=	4%

Do Parents Understand Portfolios

Yes	=	18%
No	=	70%
Somewhat	=	7%
Do Not Know	=	2%
No Response	=	3%

* Viable Means of Communication for

Teachers to Parents		Teacher to Student		Teacher to Teacher		Principal to School Board	
Yes	= 41%	Yes	= 50%	Yes	= 42%	Yes	= 22%
No	= 19%	No	= 15%	No	= 27%	No	= 44%
Somewhat	= 38%	Somewhat	= 36%	Somewhat	= 30%	Somewhat	= 27%
No Response	= 2%	No Response	= 2%	No Response	= 2%	No Response	= 6%

* Percentages have been rounded for reporting purposes, therefore not all categories equal 100%.

Table 4

Data Indicating Strengths, Weaknesses, Benefits and Barriers of Portfolio Use

**Strengths Associated With Using Portfolios	
Portfolios show student progress over a period of time	47%
Portfolios provide documentation for various purposes	20%
No Response	19%
Students learn to self-evaluate and make decisions	10%
Portfolios provide alternatives to test scores	6%
Portfolios help teachers get organized	2%
**Weaknesses Associated With Using Portfolios	
Portfolios are too time consuming	46%
No Response	27%
Lack of teacher training and guidance	23%
Portfolios lack objectivity and consistency	22%
Portfolios are too bulky and create storage problems	17%
Portfolios are not valued by others	5%
Student work is not sent home often enough	2%
*Benefits Associated With Using Portfolios	
Portfolios fully document children's progress	36%
No Response	18%
Children are empowered through self-evaluation	15%
Portfolios are a good communication tool	5%
Portfolios help children get their work organized	1%
*Barriers That Block Portfolio Use	
Portfolios are too time consuming	36%
No response	19%
Lack of teacher training and guidance	14%
Storage of bulky materials is difficult	10%
Emphasis placed on standardized test scores	6%
Negative attitudes of teachers	3%
Students work is not set home often enough	2%

* Percentages have been rounded for reporting purposes, therefore, not all categories equal 100%.

** Total is greater than 100% due to respondents listing more than one strength or weakness.

Appendix A

Portfolios

Gender _____ Highest degree earned _____ Grade currently teaching _____

How many years taught _____ Grade levels taught _____

Subjects taught _____

Please complete all of the following questions:

Do you use Whole Language teaching in your classroom? _____

Do you use portfolios? _____

What do you feel are the strengths and/or weaknesses of portfolios?

Strengths: _____

Weaknesses: _____

What do you see are the benefits or barriers to using portfolios? _____

_____

How many training sessions/courses have you attended to use portfolios? _____

_____

What school subjects do you feel work best with portfolios? _____

_____

Do you feel that portfolios, received from previous teachers, will influence your teaching strategies/attitudes toward students? How? _____

_____

Do you feel that portfolios will replace report cards, objective based testing, standardized tests (SAT & OLSAT) ? _____

Do portfolios make it easier to write IEP's ?_____

Do you feel that parents understand portfolios as a means of assessment? _____

Overall, do you believe portfolios are an effective, viable means of communication for?

Parents	yes ___	no ___	somewhat ___
Teacher to Student	yes ___	no ___	somewhat ___
Teacher to Teacher	yes ___	no ___	somewhat ___
Principal to School Board	yes ___	no ___	somewhat ___